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ABSTRACT

This 3-year longitudinal study tracked the 2 parenting variables of behavioral control and responsiveness in parents' relationships with adolescent children. The four family types involved in the study were those in which: (1) adolescents had transitioned into a mother-custody household (93 families); (2) adolescents had transitioned into a stepfather household (72 families); (3) adolescents remained in a nondivorced household (317 families); and (4) adolescents remained in a mother-custody household (267 families). In the fall of each year, students completed a self-report questionnaire that included a 15-item behavioral control scale and a 12-item parental responsiveness scale. Analysis revealed that, except for those who had transitioned into a stepfather household, adolescents reported significant declines in behavioral control. African-American adolescents reported the highest levels of behavioral control in all family types. No significant changes were reported in parental responsiveness. The lowest levels of parental responsiveness were reported within Asian-American households. Findings suggest that, for the adolescent child, perceptions of parenting practices are not significantly mediated by changes in family context. (MM)

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Parental Control of Adolescents Through Family Transitions

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ABSTRACT

Parenting practices are known to predict certain childhood outcomes. Yet, little is known about how parenting practices change over time, especially in the face of major family transitions. In the following study, two parenting variables -- behavioral control, and responsiveness -- were tracked over a year period for adolescent children in four family types: 1) Adolescents that transitioned into a mother-custody household, 2) Adolescents that transitioned to a step-father household; 3) Adolescents that remained in a non-divorced household; and, 4) Adolescents who remained in a mother-custody household. A large multiethnic sample enabled comparisons across ethnic groups and family types.

Adolescents from all family types, except transitional remarried, reported significant declines in behavioral control. In contrast, there were no reported changes in parental responsiveness. These findings suggest that, for the adolescent child, perceptions of parenting practices are not significantly mediated by changes in family context. Rather, individuation as a shared developmental theme overshadows much of the contextual influences during this time. Additionally, in accordance with the attachment literature, it appears that a loss of parental warmth is not a necessary companion to adolescent individuation.

INTRODUCTION

Studies investigating family transitions in childhood have consistently found that youngsters in single-parent households experience a decrease in behavioral control and parental warmth immediately following the marital disruption (Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982; Hetherington, 1991; Kurdek, 1987). Similarly, newly remarried families often lack adequate parental control with boys and girls. Although this is frequently interpreted as a consequence of the marital transition, studies have lacked the pre-transition assessment necessary to confirm this interpretation. Further, studies looking at filial relations in households with high levels of marital conflict suggest that inept parenting may be present before the separation (Brody and Forehand, 1988; Belsky et al., 1991).

Secondly, the impact of family transitions may be less apparent in adolescence due to the child's compelling developmental need for autonomy that encourages all parents to diminish behavioral control over their teenage offspring (Steinberg, 1986; Baumrind, 1991). Studies that have followed children of divorce a few years beyond the transition have noticed definite improvements in parental responsiveness, albeit little change behavioral control. However, few studies have followed these children into middle adolescence to compare their experiences against that of children in non-divorced and remarried households.

To help resolve these issues, this study focused on two major questions:

1) Do adolescents in newly formed mother-custody and stepfather families experience a larger drop in control, and responsiveness than adolescents in stable non-divorced and stable mother-custody families?
2) Are these differences or similarities present before the marital transition?

These questions were examined within a large multiethnic sample, thus permitting the author to make comparisons among African-American, Asian-American, European American, and Hispanic students.

METHOD

In this presentation, data from a three-year longitudinal study were used to compare parental control and responsiveness between 4 family types: Stable non-divorced families at Time 1 that transitioned to single parent at Time 2 (Transitional mother-custody), mother-custody families that transitioned to remarried status (transitional remarried), and stable mother custody families (at least 3 years since separation). The original sample was drawn from a population of approximately 10,000 students in grades 9-11 attending nine high schools, 3 in the Midwest and 6 on the West Coast. Seven of the nine schools had multi-ethnic populations. See Table 1 lists of demographic figures by family type.

The present study examine 93 transitional mother-custody families, 72 transitional remarried families, 267 stable mother-custody families, and a 15 percent (n = 317) randomly drawn sample of the available stable non-divorced households. Fortunately, and somewhat surprisingly, each comparison group reflected the varied demographics of the original population.

Students completed a self-report questionnaire in the Fall of each year that included a 15 item behavioral control scale and a 12 item parental responsiveness scale. Scale reliabilities averaged .80 and .78 respectively.

RESULTS

Repeated-measures ANCOVAs that adjusted for the effects of socioeconomic status (SES), grade and gender were employed to assess stability and change in parental control and responsiveness from T1 to T2 for each family type. Secondly, ANCOVAs were used to gauge cross-sectional differences in behavioral control at T1 and T2 with family type, gender, ethnicity, and grade as factors. Results are presented in the order of research questions.

- Behavioral Control: Interestingly, three of the four family types -- stable non-divorced, stable mother-custody, and transitional remarried families -- dropped significantly in behavioral control from Time 1 to Time 2, all with $p < .001$ (see Fig 1). Although the mother-custody to remarried group did not significantly change, adolescents from these families perceived less behavioral control than the other family types at both T1 and T2, albeit not significantly less. In fact, there was no significant difference in initial scores (T1), ending scores (T2), or net change (difference scores) between family types on behavioral control. However, a quick look at Figure 1 indicates subtle differences in the expected direction. *Time 1* single parent families exhibited the lowest mean on behavioral control and families that transitioned to single-parent status at T2 exhibited the greatest drop in behavioral control, albeit not significantly so.

- Responsiveness: Curiously, no longitudinal effects were observed for parental responsiveness across family types (see Fig. 2). Although we observe a general decline on this variable, the trend is weak. Considering T2 scores only, adolescents in newly remarried families reported the least amount of parental responsiveness, significantly less than respondents in stable mother-custody families, $p < .05$.

- Background Variables: As expected from previous studies, male respondents reported less behavioral control at T1, $p < .01$; and at T2, $p < .001$. Not surprisingly, there was a main effect for grade at T1 with older respondents perceiving less behavioral control, $p < .05$. Also consistent with the literature, an ethnic main effect revealed that African

American adolescents perceived the greatest parental control at both T1 and T2, both at $p < .05$ (see Table 2). Interestingly, post-hoc analysis indicated that adolescents from Asian-American families experienced less parental responsiveness in several family types: In transitional mother-custody families, Asian-American adolescents scored lower than African-American adolescents, $p < .05$; and Anglo adolescents, $p < .05$. In stable mother-custody families, Asian-American adolescents again scored lower than Anglos, $p < .05$. Finally, in stable non-divorced households, Asian-American adolescents scored lower than Anglos, $p < .05$, and African-American adolescents, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that marital transitions for the adolescent child have less impact upon parental control than what would be expected from childhood research in this area. The general decline in behavioral control across the sample indicates a common developmental theme that overshadows contextual differences. Although marital separations call forth a premature individuation in the young child (Kurdek, 1987; Weiss, 1979; Belsky, 1991), *adolescent* individuation occurs normatively in all family contexts (Steinberg, 1989; Baumrind, 1991; Hetherington et al, 1992).

These findings differ dramatically with research on young children of divorce or remarriage (Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974, 1980), which often highlight the contrast between the just-divorced and the never-divorced homes. In the end, what the young child inherits as a consequence of divorce, the adolescent claims as a rite of passage. In other words, both the young child of divorce and the adolescent renegotiate parent-child relations as old parental boundaries are pushed and new limits set.

Overall, respondents were consistently less likely to report changes in parental responsiveness than behavioral control. Considering the literature on adolescent attachment and identity development, these results make sense. This research has clearly shown that storm and stress is not a necessary companion to adolescent individuation. In fact, closer parent-child relations usually help foster feelings of autonomy and competence in the adolescent child (Offer & Offer, 1975; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986).

Ogbu (1988) has argued that minority cultures advocate alternative strategies to successful child-rearing than what is espoused in main-stream culture. Indeed, this study found considerable differences in parenting across ethnic groups. African-American adolescents reported the highest levels of behavioral control in all family types. This finding in not unusual and supports the notion that the greater physical and emotional demands present in low-income urban environments may accentuate the need for authoritarian

parenting practices (Baumrind, 1991). Here, parents are protecting their child from a subversive environment by exercising greater parental monitoring. Further, African-American families living in poverty conditions are subject chronic stressors that may contribute to punitive parenting practices (McLoyd, 1990).

This study found the lowest levels of parental responsiveness within Asian-American households, which may indicate that parental support takes on a culturally specific meaning that sharply contrasts with how this variable is typically defined within the European-American parenting style. Above all else, Asian-American parents emphasize familial interdependence, with the child occupying a subordinate and dutiful role in a highly structured family hierarchy (Harrison, et al., 1990). In this sense, the child's educational achievement is stronger reflection of family status than personal competency. Work by Bond and Wang (1983), Hsu, (1981), Wu (1985) indicate such filial piety is translated into highly authoritarian and emotionally inexpressive child rearing strategies. Within this familial context, we would not expect parents to offer many reinforcers or emotional support, since the child's success is not a personal gain but a family achievement.

This study provided some answers on how adolescents perceive parenting practices across time and within a multitude of family contexts and ethnic backgrounds. Importantly, it has raised questions for future studies: When do the significant drops in behavioral control first occur for children in non-divorced families, and are familial changes more influential at this time? We must continue to explore the vicissitudes of parenting practices in order to better map out its course within the family life cycle.

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Appendix
Questionnaire Items

Parental Responsiveness Dimension:

When you get a good grade in school, how often do your parents or guardians: (Response categories are "never," "sometimes," and "usually.")

1) Praise me?
2) They don't care? (reverse coded)
3) They don't know about it? (reverse coded)

When you get a poor grade in school, how often does your parents or guardians: (Response categories are "never," "sometimes," and "usually.")

4) Encourage me to try harder?
5) Offer to help me?
6) They don't care? (reverse coded)
7) How much do your parents really know who your friends are? (Response categories are "don't know," "know a little," and "know a lot.")

How much are your parents involved in your high school education? (Answer for the parents with whom you have the most contact) (Response categories are "never," "sometimes," and "usually." Separated by Mother, Father, Step-mother, Step-father)

8) Helps with homework when I ask?
9) Watches me in sports or activities?

These are some of the things that parents (stepparents and guardians) say to their children. Please think about your family conversations. Indicate for each of the following items how frequently your parents say things like: (Response categories are "never," rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "very often.")

10) Say that you should always look at both sides of the issue?
11) Admit that you know more about some things than adults do?
12) Say that every member of your family should have some say in family decisions?

Behavioral Control Dimension:

1) In a typical week, what is the latest you can stay out on **SCHOOL NIGHTS** (Monday-Thursday)? (Response categories are "not allowed out," "before 8:00," "8:00 to 8:59," "9:00 to 9:59," "10:00 to 10:59," "11:00 or later," and "as late as I want.")

How much do your parents **TRY** to know: (Response categories are "don't try," "try a little," and "try a lot.")

2) Where you go at night?
3) What you do with your free time?
4) Where you are most afternoons after school?

How much do your parents **REALLY** know: (Response categories are "don't know," "know a little," and "know a lot.")

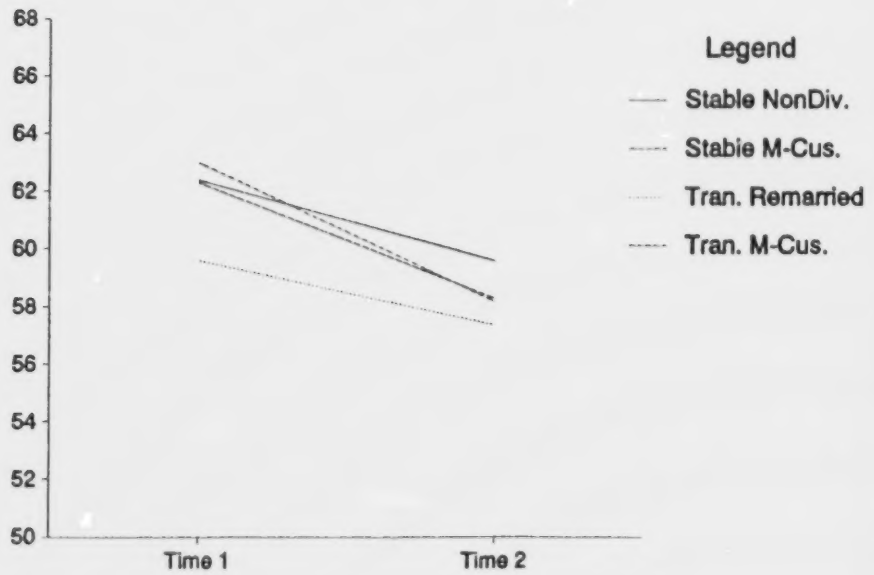
5) Where you go at night?
6) What you do with your free time?
7) Where you are most afternoons after school?

Below are listed several topics that families with high school students often have to make decisions about. Who makes most of the decisions concerning: (Response categories are "parents only" " mostly parents", "joint decision", "mostly myself", "myself only"

8) What classes I take in school?
9) How late at night I can stay out?
10) Which friends I spend time with?
11) At what age I can leave school?
12) How I spend my money?
13) Whether I can drink alcohol?
14) How much time I spend with friends?
15) When I can start dating?

Fig. 1

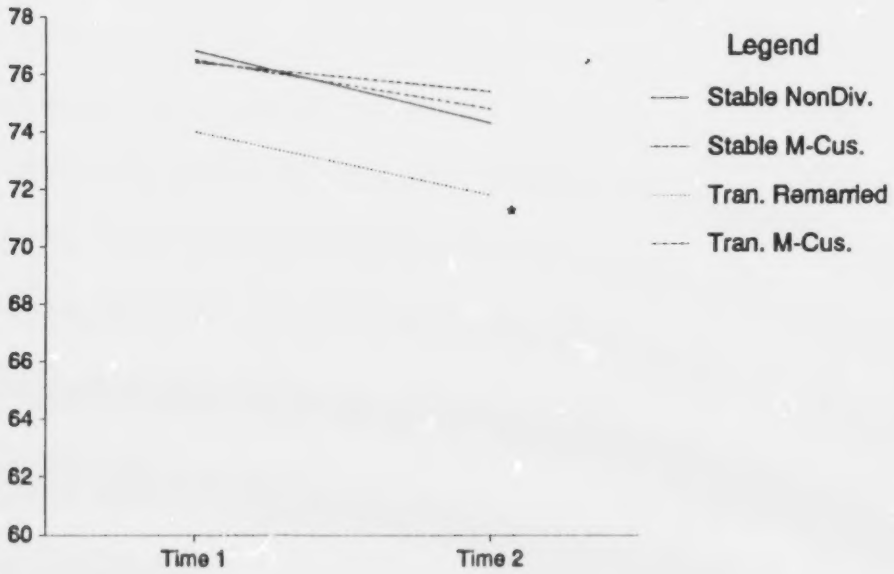
Change in Behavioral Control for Four Family Types



All Family Types Dropped Signficantly ($p<.05$) Except Transitional Remarried Families.

Fig. 2

Change in Responsiveness for Four Family Types



* Sig. difference at T2, $p<.05$

Note: drops in Responsiveness were not sig. for all four family types.

Table 1

DEMOGRAPHIC FIGURES BY FAMILY TYPE

	Stable Non-divorced	Stable Mother-Custody	Transitional Remarried	Transitional Mother-Custody
(n)	(317)	(267)	(72)	(93)
SES				
Lower	8%	16%	12%	13%
Working	18%	23%	33%	20%
Middle	43%	38%	39%	35%
Prof.	31%	23%	16%	31%
Gender				
Male	47%	39%	46%	44%
Female	53%	61%	54%	56%
Ethnicity				
African Am.	4%	20%	20%	15%
Anglo	64%	51%	58%	46%
Hispanic	21%	13%	6%	19%
Asian	11%	16%	16%	20%

Table 2

Mean scores by Gender, Grade and Ethnicity on Behavioral Control for Time 1 and Time 2

	Gender		Grade			Ethnicity			
	Male	Female	9-10	10-11	11-12	BLK	WHT	HIS	ASN
T1	61.2	64.1	64.2	62.0	61.0	65.7	61.8	62.9	61.9
T2	57.3	60.6	60.5	57.3	58.8	62.6	58.4	58.8	57.0

Note: Mean scores are adjusted for effects of gender and SES. Difference scores are adjusted for T1 score minus sample mean

Table 3

Mean scores by Gender, Grade and Ethnicity on Responsiveness for Time 1, and Time 2

	Gender		Grade			Ethnicity			
	Male	Female	9-10	10-11	11-12	BLK	WHT	HIS	ASN
T1	76.2	76.4				76.2	78.0	75.0	71.6
T2	74.3	74.6				75.7	75.8	72.7	69.7

Note: Mean scores are adjusted for effects of gender and SES. Difference scores are adjusted for T1 score minus sample mean